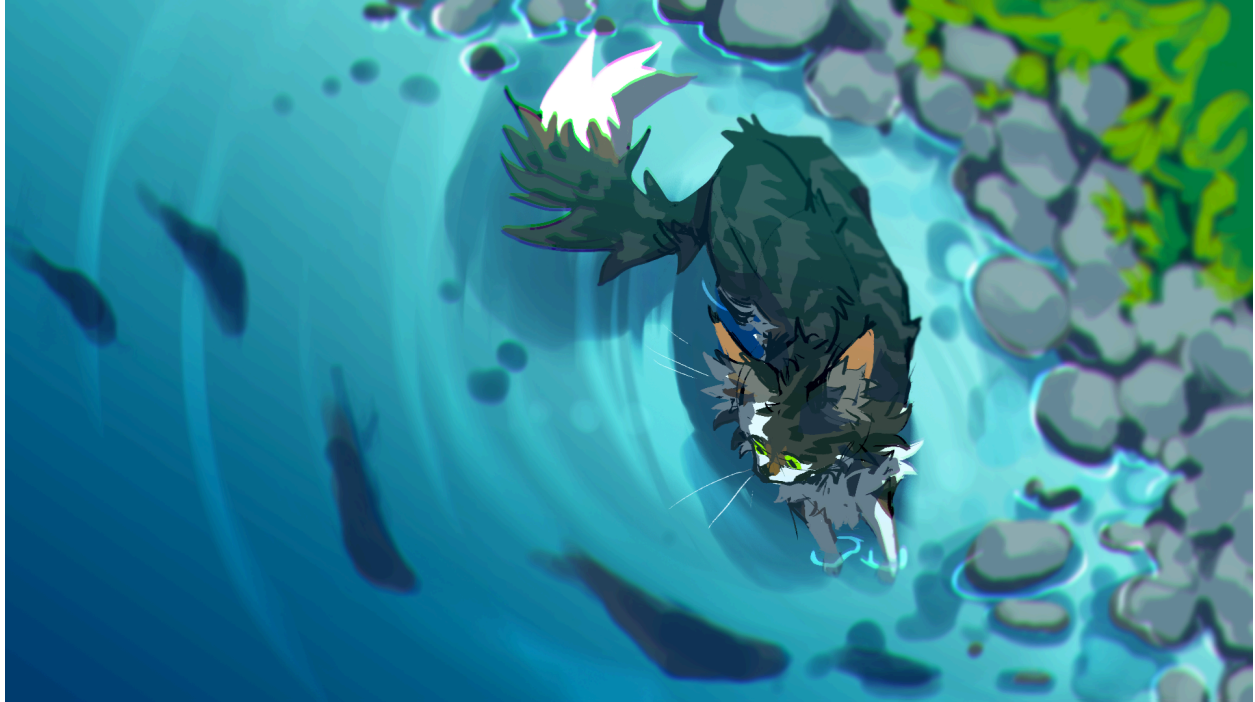




A morning's travel away from the city, a lake rested peacefully after the hard rains of the days before. The surface perfectly mimicked the sky's warm, blue greeting. The stillness of the surface concealed the bustle underneath; all kinds of fish were swimming about, looking for food that the rain washed into their domain.

On the banks of the river, a pair of interested eyes looked on. Prickly Pine watched as the fish darted back and forth not a cat-length from his nose, the smell of them taunting him more than the sight. Ever since coming to live in the ruined city with his estranged mother and her group, he had yet to catch a single one. Living on the docks, stealing from the morning catch of the fishfolk—it had been an easy life. Slowly, he lifted one paw over the surface of the water, tracking the shadow that hovered closest to him. After a few moments, he slammed his paw down on top of the shadow, water drops jumping out of the way. He lifted his paw from the water to see: nothing. Nothing at all! "*Puah*," he huffed with a tinge of annoyance. He shook the water from his paw and settled back into a sitting position with his paws tucked under him. Looking up at the sky, he saw the sun almost directly above him; the tom had been trying to catch something since the morning. Talking to himself, he started to mumble, "I think I'm doing everything that Towering Fir said to do... I'm keeping my shadow out of the water... doing that 'slow paw' thing... why isn't this working..."

Prickly Pine came to the lake for one mission, and promised himself he wouldn't leave until he completed his mission: to catch a fish. By himself. He had to—how else was he going to prove he was capable of teaching the new kittens how if he couldn't himself? He wasn't about to ask for any more help either. Not because he was older than most of the cats in the group, but because he already had gotten help from most of them.

He turned his gaze back down to the water, letting his green eyes scan for another shadow glinting under its surface. There were none close to him—his last attempt alerted all the fish around of his presence. He would have to be patient... again. His tail twitched in anticipation; he wasn't very good at sitting still for long.

As he was sitting by the water, he heard a growl come from somewhere close. He suddenly perked up, ears scanning for nearby danger or allies. Another growl echoed, and Prickly Pine looked around more intently before he realized where the sound came from: his stomach. His stomach was growling. "I haven't eaten all day.." He whined to himself as he slid down into a relaxed position, paw lazily dipped into the water.

Letting his gaze wander further out into the middle of the lake, he watched as the water birds—ducks, he'd been told before—bobbed in the center of the water, occasionally dipping their heads under the surface and cleaning their feathers with their beaks. One of the ducks had even gone completely underwater, coming up a few moments later with what Prickly Pine could only assume was lunch. His stomach growled again.

He turned away from the ducks and rested his head on his front paws, the midday sun warming his fur and inviting him to nap. The lake's surface began to ripple softly when a light breeze started up. The wind also picked up a few leaves from the ground which had fallen during the storms. One of the leaves, after dancing with the wind in circles, landed on top of the water to rest. Prickly Pine watched it do so before he closed his eyes in preparation of a quick snooze, only to be jolted awake moments later by a loud splash. He looked around with wide eyes, but he didn't see anything strange. However, the leaf that had just landed in the water was gone, and ripples were left in its place. *Where did the leaf go?* He wondered. He sat up in curiosity and slowly padded across to the rocks closest to where the leaf had been. He could see shadows of fish circling around the area under the surface; it looked like they were fighting over something. Food maybe? No—a few moments later the fish stopped fighting over it, and it slowly rose to the surface. It was the leaf! Prickly Pine was taken aback—he'd never heard of fish eating leaves before! *No... they didn't eat the leaf though*, he slowly reasoned, *they fought over it...maybe they thought it was food?*

He wanted to see if the fish would do it again. Looking around at the shore, he spotted another leaf wedged between two rocks. He trotted over to it and picked it up in his mouth and returned to the water's edge. Making sure there were still fish in the area, he set down the leaf and hooked it with one of his fore-claws. Stretching his paw over the water, he sheathed his claws and let the leaf float down until rings of water announced its landing. At first, the fish didn't seem to care much about the leaf, but after a few seconds, one of them shot up and grabbed the leaf in its mouth and dragged it under. Suddenly, the surface started rippling with the excitement happening underneath. All the fish in the area were fighting for the leaf, as if it was food. Prickly Pine could only watch in amusement and bewilderment. *Fish are pretty silly, but I guess if I was hungry enough I might eat leaves too*, he remembered the horrid tasting herbs Cypress Trail had given him before the trip to find Shaded Creek and shivered.

*Wait a second...what if...?* The fish were still preoccupied with the leaf. He flattened himself onto the ground and slowly focused his gaze on the middle of the fish fight. Raising his forepaws, and balancing on his hind-legs, time seemed to stop. All of a sudden, Prickly Pine bolted forward. Water splashed everywhere, getting the rocks on the shore soaked as well as the tom. Gradually, the chaos of the jump calmed, and what remained was a soaking, black-and-white, Prickly Pine: head bowed toward the water, with a small fish struggling in his jaws.

*I... I did it! I DID IT! Da solo!*